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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of death on teachers' lives, noting the ways in which teachers knew what to do for their students and themselves when a death occurred. The study investigated the effects of one high school student's death on four teachers and examined how they experienced that death personally and professionally. Through 3 interviews over 18 months, teachers told their stories about the incident and how it impacted them. The first two interviews, held within weeks of the student's death and at the end of that school term, were individual interviews. Participants told the story of the death, its impact on them, their own training or lack of training in coping with death in a school context, supports within the school community, and their own follow-up work with students. The final interview was a group discussion of the death held after the first anniversary of the death. Teachers' stories revealed their curricular decisions and the work they engaged in with students. Despite their concerns and fears, they all chose to take care of their students with compassion. Teachers provided time and space for students to discuss their experiences with death and grief. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Death, Grief and Loss in Classrooms: Teachers' Stories

Jane Moore

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Death, grief and loss in classrooms: Teachers' stories

Purposes

Death comes to the classroom, whether invited or not. Events like the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999 or the Laurie Dan shooting in Winnetka, Illinois in 1989[1] raise our consciousness about death in schools in a dramatic way. Nonetheless, death occurs in the lives of schoolchildren regularly. Students bring feelings and experiences of grief and loss to classroom contexts, as do teachers.

This paper reports on a study that examines the effects of death on teachers' lives—the ways in which teachers know what to do for their students and for themselves when a death occurs. What prompts teachers to move past the fear they have of dealing with death in a school context, and choose a compassionate response that addresses these students' out-of-school curricula? What can these teachers' choices and choice-making processes teach us? How can these teachers' stories transform our own lives as educators and persons? Teacher stories about bereavement can change lives—the lives of teachers and other professionals working in schools today, the lives of the students in their classrooms, and the lives of the parents who want someone to recognize the loss in their children's lives and help support them.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

The body of knowledge of teacher stories about bereavement is quite scarce. There are books about death in a school context, but teacher stories about this subject are virtually absent (Berns, 1997; Brown, 1999; Cassini & Rogers, 1989; Doka, 1999; Dougy Center for Grieving Children, 1998; Dudley, 1995; Dyregrov, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1998;

Liotta, 1996; Lubetsky & Martin J. Lubetsky, 1984; Stevenson & Stevenson, 1996; Thomas, 1984). We all have a basic need for story, for organizing our experiences into tales of important happenings (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 2). These stories connect who we are, what we experience, and with whom. This study gives voice to teacher stories about death, grief and loss.

Schubert's conceptualization of curriculum allows teachers to make knowing their students well, and valuing their experiences—including grief— a priority. Curriculum resides in "spheres of student life outside of school" (Schubert, 2000a, p. 175). He believes that we should "expand our horizons to see curriculum as whatever brings insight, meaning, and contributory action" (Schubert, 2000b, p. 236). The death of a loved one inevitably has the ability to bring that insight and meaning into our lives. "Exemplary teaching must be built in direct, explicit ways upon children's lives outside of school" (Schubert & Ayers, 1999, p. 80).

What Carol Melnick and William Schubert call the "out-of-school curriculum" (Melnick, 1999; Schubert, 2000b) includes the needs, interests, lives and experiences of children. This out-of-school curriculum could be seen as the life history or life story of the student. Each child in every class brings a story, a way of knowing, and a series of experiences into the classroom. Many children bring the story of a parent or sibling's death to school (Dougy Center for Grieving Children, 1998). "Stories, and thereby aspects of children's selves, can be silenced if listeners (including teachers and peers) do not appreciate the diverse ways stories are crafted and the range of experiences they tap" (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 4). The stories that children bring can resonate with teachers and allow teachers to make connections with students.

> The essence of the out-of-school curriculum involves teachers who acknowledge that students are fully human, and who are, in turn, willing to reveal themselves as human too. The essence of that lived experience is characterized by a mutual invitation for teachers and students to share each other's out-of-school curriculum. (Melnick, 1999, p. 101)

Max van Manen (van Manen, 1986, 1991) described a pedagogical relationship that reflects compassion. This is the kind of compassion that allows teachers to choose to value the experiences and lives of bereaved students. van Manen says that tact "makes whole what is broken. Tact heals" (van Manen, 1991, p. 166). Children who enter the classroom broken by their loss and grief can find healing with the help of school personnel who care. Nel Noddings (1995) tells us that while grief counselors and others can contribute to the care and well-being of grieving students, it is ultimately the teacher who chooses to respond that can make the difference. "Artificially separating the emotional, academic, and moral care of children into tasks for specially designated experts contributes to fragmentation of life in schools" (Noddings, 1995, p. 26).

Methods, Modes of Inquiry/Data Sources

I studied the effects of one student's death on a small group of teachers and how they experienced that death both personally and professionally. The school in which I conducted my study was Westwood High School (pseudonym), located in an affluent suburb of a large Midwestern city. Its enrollment is nearly 2,000 primarily Caucasian students. Through a series of interviews over an eighteen-month period, I asked teachers to tell their stories of the incident and how it impacted them. The first two interviews, one held within weeks of the student's death, and the other at the end of that school term (4-6 months later) were individual interviews. The participants were asked to tell the story of the death, its impact on them professionally and personally and to reflect on their

own training (or lack of training) in dealing with death in a school context. The second interview concentrated on what support these teachers found in the school community in dealing with the student's death. They also discussed their own follow-up work with students. The final interview was a group discussion of the death by all four teacher participants, held after the first anniversary of the student's death. The focus of this study was to allow for the "teacher voice" to be heard. While other groups---students, administrators, school support staff---figure into the story these teachers tell, teachers are at the heart of this research study.

Initially, seven teachers were contacted two weeks following the death of Harry (all names in study are pseudonyms), a senior, in a car accident. I had met only one of the teachers prior to the initial interview. Of the seven, four agreed to participate in the interviews. Anna is a member of the special education faculty, who described herself as "an older teacher, a veteran teacher." She had been at Westwood for seventeen years. Beth, a member of the mathematics department, and the deceased student's teacher at the time of his death, had taught for five years. Fred, another member of the special education department was the student's case manager. He had been teaching for twenty years. Jeff, a 27-year veteran, teaches social studies at Westwood. He was Harry's sophomore social studies teacher.

This study is essentially an "inquiry into narrative" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 416). Each of the participants "stories" his or her experience, and creates a narrative around the death of that student. Stories are opportunities for making sense of our lives, and making meaning. "No life fits neatly into any one "plot" line and narratives are multiple, contradictory, changing and differently available, depending on the social

forces that shape our lives" (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 125). The focus of this study was to listen to the stories teachers tell about the death of one of their students, to hear how they story their experiences, and to build together a narrative from which other teacher-stories can develop. "The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Results/Conclusions

Throughout the stories the four teachers told, they revealed their curricular decisions, and the work they engaged in with students. Despite their concerns and fears, all four teachers chose to take care of their students. There was never a conscious decision to move away from fear to compassion. Yet compassion was the choice of each of these teachers, as they engaged in a pedagogical relationship filled with care and concern. Beth kept Harry's desk in the classroom empty, rather than assigning it to another student. She wrote and rewrote a condolence letter to Harry's family. Anna and Fred attended the funeral and participated in a student-led assembly in Harry's honor. Anna and Jeff recalled that they both went to look for Harry's friends. Fred spent time on the phone with Harry's mother. He listened as she replayed the accident aloud to him. "All I could say was, "I'm sorry.' You know, what could I say to her…such tremendous grief she felt!"

The teachers provided space and time for students to discuss their experiences with death and grief. Beth told her students about how she felt and the ways in which she coped with Harry's death. She also told her class that Harry was the first student death

she had experienced as a teacher. Fred's grief was palpable when he talked about Harry, and it was highly unlikely that he was able to mask that grief with his students. In fact, he mentioned that his students recognized that he was a fellow griever. His class had a discussion about Harry for about twenty minutes on a day about three weeks after his death. Jeff was uncomfortable with discussion about death, but knew "it had to be addressed." Beth shared with her class that a death may bring up feelings about "people who have died, or people who are near death right now."

The teachers acknowledged the out-of-school curriculum of their students' lives, and connected it to the in-school curriculum. For example, Anna connected Harry's death to a world religions topic her class was studying and provided time for discussion and reflection. The factual discussion triggered comments and conversations about other deaths that the students experienced. Jeff wished someone would come to schools and tell teachers that it is necessary to acknowledge students' pain and loss. He bemoaned the fact that teachers are kept in the dark about their students' out-of-school lives, and told stories of students who were suffering losses unknown to him.

Educational Significance

Nel Noddings says, "Caring is not dependent on what I do *to* you, but on what I do and how *you receive or respond to it"* (Gordon, Benner, & Noddings, 1996, xiii). What supports one child will not necessarily be received in the same way by another. The teachers' stories in this study provide, however, an opportunity to examine possible strategies and methods of supporting students in their grief. They encourage teachers to be genuine, to seek a greater self-understanding of death, and to enter into the out-of-school lives of their students. As teachers educate themselves and are educated about

death and grief, they bring a new dimension and artistry to what is already a complex and daunting profession. This dimension of caring and concern may allow the one opportunity a student has to speak about loss, express feelings and confusion, and accept support when he or she needs it most.

Most importantly, I feel that the stories of the teachers in this study are transformative. They present the possibility of changing the ways in which we will deal with death in classrooms. Schubert (1986) tells us that when transformations occur, "the curriculum becomes a reconceiving of one's perspective on life (Schubert, 1986, p. 33). Teachers begin to make new curriculum choices based on a new life perspective. Taking classroom time to discuss the death of a fellow student is a curricular choice.

"Without the pain that comes from significant loss, there can be no story. Without the storytelling, there can be no meaning. Without meaning, there can be no healing" (Harvey, 1996, p. 205). I would add, "Without meaning, there can be no change." I invite educators to acknowledge the stories their students and colleagues bring to school about death, grief and loss, and tell their own stories, as well.

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[i] Laurie Dan entered a Hubbard Woods (Winnetka, IL) classroom in 1989 and shot a student, wounding 5 others. In 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold charged their school (Columbine High School, Denver, CO) with guns, eventually wounding 23 people and leaving 15 dead, including themselves.

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